

Documents on Diplomacy: The Source

American Slaves in Algiers

Richard O'Bryen to Thomas Jefferson, Algiers, April 28, 1786

Sir;

It is my unfortunate lot to write you many letters from Algiers but since the pest [*plague*] rages so much, I take the liberty of informing you of the lamentable situation of my crew in the marine where they are employed on the most laborious work & so much exhausted that if some speedy measure is not adopted to redeem them from slavery I am afraid they will all be carried off by the pest, as it rages much. On the 22nd of this month there died 215 people in Algiers, & in those three months past there have died 200 Christian slaves. The Spaniards & Neapolitans having redeemed their people, there are at present but 800 slaves belonging to *Bylick* [*probably the government of Algiers*] & about 170 slaves belonging to private property. Therefore we expect to be called to the marine as there is a scarcity of slaves at present to do the requisite duty on board the Algerine cruisers. One of my crew is dead and another, after having the pest 14 days with two large buboes on him, it has pleased God that he should recover. By considering our present unfortunate situation, we hope it will induce our country & countrymen who are charged with Barbary affairs to adopt some speedy & effectual measure for our release, hoping they will never suffer a remnant of their countrymen to die in slavery in Algiers. Certainly it can answer no good end of keeping us in slavery, if nothing concerns a peace, for redeeming the slaves & making a peace are two different things in Algiers. It is my sincere opinion that the Dey & his Ministers consider that they made a regular bargain with M^r Lamb for our ransom, & I believe it is recorded so on the public books of this regency. I should not be surprised if another American Ambassador was to come to Algiers, at the Dey's telling him he had made one bargain already with the Americans, which they did not fulfill.

It seems the Neapolitan Ambassador had obtained a truce with this Regency for three months, & the Ambassador wrote his court of his success, but about the 1st of April when the cruisers were fitting out, the Ambassador went to the Dey & hoped the Dey would give the necessary orders to the Captains of his cruisers not to take the Neapolitan vessels. The Dey said the meaning of the truce was for not to take the Neapolitan cruisers, but if his *chebecs* should meet the Neapolitan merchantmen to take them & send them for Algiers. The Ambassador said that the Neapolitan cruisers would not want a pass on those terms. The Dey said if his *chebecs* should meet either men-of-war or merchant vessels to take them, so gave orders accordingly. The Algerines sailed the 9th instant and are gone

I believe off the coast of Italy. This shows there is very little confidence to be put in the royal word. No principle of national honor will bind these people & I believe not much confidence to be put in them in treaties. The Algerines are not inclinable to a peace, with the Neapolitans. I hear of no negotiation. When the two frigates arrive with the money for the ransom of the slaves I believe they are done with the Neapolitans. The being so handily situated to them, in 24 hours the cruisers are on the coasts of Italy, which is a great inducement for not making a peace. On the 23rd instant arrived a Neapolitan prize to the Algerines, & on the 25th arrived a Neapolitan, Jittan, a prize. They were taken near the gulf of Genoa. The crews of them escaped with their boats. This is a great inducement to the Algerines not to make a peace with the Neapolitans, & the Algerines being under no dread of a bombardment on their city, therefore if they should obtain a peace, the terms will certainly be very high. It certainly makes a great difference with those people, a making peace with Naples or America, for they well know we are situated at a great distance from them, & if we do not come in their way they will not go on our coasts, being a great distance & navigation that they are not acquainted with. The Neapolitans are very handy to them & having many merchant vessels, the Algerines are generally attended with success in taking some every cruise.

The Spaniards have paid a great sum for their peace, 1,200,000 dollars is the sum paid in Algiers. The Government is very rich & the Dey is very political. No nation can fit out an equal number of cruisers so cheap as the Dey of Algiers. In Algiers the cruisers are not all public vessels, there are about three out of the nine that belong to *Bylick*, the rest belong to head officers as Prime minister, General of the Marine, & General of the County, Lord of the Bedchamber &c. Those great men owning the cruisers, they do not wish for peace with those nations in the Straits. The present Dey is very old, & I believe cannot live many years. When he goes to his long home I dare say there will be a great change in the policy of this Regency, making war on some & making peace with others. It is a great thing in a peace with Algiers to make the treaty with the Dey that has just got the government in his hands as it may be more likely he might keep to the treaty he made himself. They generally do not mind what treaties former Deys make. It is customary with every Dey to renew all treaties. Tunis being tributary to Algiers it would be requisite in the treaty with Algiers to notice Tunis. It is not very easy to know the proper way of laying the foundation of a treaty with those Algerines. Be assured that the foundation of

all treaties should be laid by some person that could be depended on in Algiers, & then a wise man to come & conclude the Treaty. I should not put much confidence in any Consul in Algiers to have the managing of the American treaty, for it is well known that those nations that are at peace with the Barbary States do not wish that any other nation should obtain a peace, that they should not reap part of those advantageous branches of commerce in the Mediterranean. Before the war the Americans used to employ 200 sail of merchantmen in the straits trade, & used to reap great advantages by it, but at present our trade is but small, being cramped on all quarters, which must certainly hurt the Americans much, & when once commerce gets into another channel, it is a long time before it is brought back again. Certainly the Indies of the French is their trade in the Mediterranean. The French are too knowing to admit us to be sharers of this valuable trade. They & many more trading nations will leave many obstacles in the way of the Americans obtaining a peace with the Barbary States. The Algerines are in no measure depending on the Grand Seigneur [*the Sultan in Constantinople, their overlord*]. They reverence him on account of his being the head or protector of their religion. A letter from him to the Dey of Algiers has some weight in favor of the nation whom the Grand Seigneur writes about, but letters from the Christian Kings have no weight. Money is their God & Mahomet their Prophet. The Dey of Algiers must conduct himself agreeably to the Parliament or the Soldiery, he not being absolute in every affair. Those great men here must give their voice, & it must be attended to by the Dey. The *Causnagee*, that is the prime minister & second Dey, it is believed will succeed the Dey, in the government of this Regency. The *Mickelhassee*, or general of the marine & fortifications, is son-in-law to the *Causnagee*, & it is supposed will be prime minister. This man has very great influence & no man can fill his office better than he does, it is he who directs the cruisers where to cruise, & I believe that any thing he mentions or advises the Dey to has much weight. Amongst all those great men the *Mickelhassee* I believe is most in favor of the Americans. There should some man that could be depended on here have power to lay the foundation of the American treaty & those great men should be paid much attention to that have the Dey's ear at command. A few valuable presents given in a proper season to these great men would not be hove away, as I am sure no nation can obtain a peace here without they gain some of those great men in their favour. When M^r Lamb asked for a peace the Dey undoubtedly said he would not treat, the Dey not know-

ing the minds of his ministry. Then had some of those great men been in favour of America, they would have showed the Dey that a war with America could not be attended with any advantage to the Algerines as we were so far off & they would have courted the Dey to make a peace with America. Once you get those great men in favour of a nation as they rise in office, they have the more influence & are more apt to keep the treaties that it was their wish the former Dey should make than to keep treaties that they wished the Dey had never made.

There are other good men the *Aujar* or general of the county, & there is the Lord of the Bedchamber Sidi Ali which is the Dey's companion & much in his good graces. This Sidi Ali was a Georgian or Greek who turned & is thought much of with the Dey but nor on a very friendly footing with the other great men.

I shall mention to you a M^r Wolfe who is an English merchant here, & is exceeding well acquainted with the policy of this country. This man told me he had wrote four years past to D^r Franklin respecting this Barbary affair. He is much esteemed here & in good repute. Also a M^r Fauri who is watchmaker to the Dey & his ministers these 25 years. These are proper men for sounding these Algerines on any subject, but if an American comes here before some step has been taken, as I have mentioned, he will perhaps meet with as much success as M^r Lamb did.

Your most obedient & very humble Servant

RICHARD O'BRYEN,
SLAVE TO THE REGENCY OF ALGIERS

NB. There have arrived three Neapolitan & one Genoese prize to the cruisers. ■

Source

The Emerging Nation: A Documentary History of the Foreign Relations of the United States under the Articles of Confederation, 1780-1789, Mary A. Giunta, Editor-in-Chief, Volume III. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996.

NA: RG 59, *Consular Despatches, Algiers (C)*; M23, reel 1.